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And So It Is Written: Supporting Librarians on the Path to Publication

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Abstract

This article describes a program developed to support Irish academic librarians writing for publication. While writing support programs for faculty are well established, this is the first formal writing program specifically for librarians in Ireland or the United Kingdom. The program comprises three elements: a one-day workshop, an optional peer-feedback day, and an academic writing blog. The one-day workshop focuses on the craft of writing, identifying appropriate publishing outlets, knowing audience and purpose, and developing the confidence to “put work out there.” Participants are encouraged to attend a peer-feedback day to give and receive feedback on their work. The value of looking outside the literature of librarianship for publishing opportunities and for collaboration with colleagues is stressed. The benefits of writing support programs are identified and some American models are described. Guidelines for establishing writing support programs are offered.

Introduction

Academic writing as a form of professional development for librarians has not been explored in the Irish context. Writing offers an opportunity for librarians to reflect on their practice. It is potentially a powerful tool to help identify where we have come from, where we are now, and how we want to develop. In addition to enhancing curriculum

vitae, writing for publication offers an opportunity to join in national and international dialogues on professional issues and concerns. Publishing is an activity that a limited number of librarians in Ireland currently engage in. However, as programs and support networks become more prevalent, academic publishing can increasingly be recognized as a role of librarians.

Tysick and Babb (2006) describe the process for tenure-track posts in the United States for academic librarians, identifying the prevalent academic culture that encourages or requires research. They suggest that in a typical tenure-track position, competencies in research, writing, and operating in the academic environment are typically acquired within a six-year period, alongside traditional library duties. There is no such motivation or pressure on Irish librarians to publish, and no demonstrable career advantage, as Irish librarians are appointed to contract or permanent posts. While evidence of publication might assist a job applicant, there is no formal requirement for this. A recent professional development survey carried out by the Irish Academic and National Library Training Co-operative (ANLTC) showed that only 7% of respondents had published a journal article (ANLTC, 2006). Against this background, I decided to develop an academic writing program under the auspices of ANLTC.

ANLTC is a collaborative training organization serving the seven universities in the Republic of Ireland, the two universities in Northern Ireland, the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland, the National Library, the Royal Irish Academy, and the Dublin Institute of Technology. Each of the 13 institutions, which are spread throughout the country, organizes one training course for member libraries each year. This is run at the home institution. Each member library can send two or occasionally more people for a nominal fee. Courses cover a wide range of topics. If a course proves popular, it is repeated. The program in 2010 included web searching, digitization, planning library exhibitions and bibliometrics. The academic writing workshop is a component of ANLTC training. Now in its fourth year, it has developed into an ongoing program which includes a peer-feedback day and an academic writing blog (<http://anltcwriters.blogspot.com>). The aim of the program is to help participants develop their writing skills along with the confidence and motivation to write. This article describes the workshop and the peer-feedback day in the context of the value of formal writing supports for librarians.

The Writing Workshop

Central to the program is a one-day workshop, which is limited to a maximum of 14 participants. Forty-eight people have participated to date. Topics covered include:

- Idea generation
- Beginning to write
- Clarifying audience and purpose
- The nature of academic writing, with input from published authors
- Developing a writing voice
- Developing a writing plan, including goals and deadlines
- Structuring an article

- Drafting and redrafting
- Identifying publishing outlets
- Sending email queries to editors
- Submitting articles
- The peer-review process and re-submission

Reasons for attending are varied. They include finding the motivation, confidence and discipline to write, learning the actual craft of writing, adapting a project or thesis to a journal article, and navigating the intricacies of dealing with publishers.

The day has a strong practical emphasis. Participants do some free writing exercises, create an outline for an article, devise a working title, abstract and keywords, and clarify their audience and purpose. They then begin to draft sections of their articles. Throughout the day there are opportunities to interact with colleagues from other institutions. This dialogue is important both for the sharing of experiences and for discovering potential writing collaborations.

Workshop participants are encouraged to not limit themselves to the literature of librarianship and to explore publications in other disciplines. Broadening the publication base offers more publishing avenues and the opportunity to connect with people outside the discipline. Presenting papers and posters at non-library conferences is also encouraged. This has the potential to open up interesting publishing opportunities and writing partnerships.

The emphasis is on writing for professional and peer-reviewed journals. However, conference presentations, book chapters and book reviews are also discussed. The one-day workshop concludes by encouraging participants to continue their writing with a view toward meeting again later in the year for a peer-feedback day.

Peer-Feedback Day

Participants are asked to submit an abstract one month prior to the peer-feedback day and are paired with “writing buddies” from different organizations who exchange their first drafts two weeks prior to the meeting. After some initial “warm up” writing exercises, participants are provided with guidelines for giving feedback to their writing buddies. Sample questions used in the pairs include the following:

- What did you like about this piece of writing?
- What ideas seemed strongest to you?
- Does the piece have a clear, coherent theme running throughout? Are there any aspects not focused on the theme?
- Does the piece have a clear organization and structure? Do any sections seem less well structured?
- What evidence/new thinking/arguments does the writer use?
- What do you think could be changed or improved?
- Are there any questions that occur to you as you read this piece?

Through this form of structured questioning, unclear meanings, insufficient or unreliable support for claims, digressions, and lack of a clear theme and argument can be examined. The questioning aims to guide authors to critically look at their own writing and to discover through the interaction what to fix, change, or work on. This process of discovery often results in new insights and substantial rewriting. The peer-feedback session is followed by an open session where participants have the opportunity to discuss their work with the larger group and to exchange tips and experiences.

Academic Writing Blog

During the first two years of the program I maintained an e-mail list through which I alerted participants to calls for papers and provided information on various writing resources. I developed a writing blog (<http://anltcwriters.blogspot.com>) to encourage dialogue and the sharing of information about writing. The blog is open to all and I'm keen to encourage participation across the globe. Academic writing offers an opportunity to share experiences, skills and practice across all library sectors, both nationally and internationally.

Benefits of Writing Support

Writing interventions for academic staff have been actively explored and documented. The research on the value of writing interventions for librarians is not extensive and is U.S.-based. Tysick and Babb (2006) examined an academic writing group for junior faculty librarians at the University at Buffalo which was established in 2002. They found that a benefit of a structured support program extended beyond just writing support. Over a two-year period the group developed a viable writing program which expanded into a system of peer mentoring for new librarians. Miller and Benefiel (1998) examined the support group as a strategy for success among academic librarians seeking tenure at the Sterling C. Evans Library at Texas A&M University. Topics covered by the tenure support group include advice on presenting posters at conferences, guidance on obtaining university research funds, and training on statistical analysis. As in the case of the University at Buffalo, Miller and Benefiel found the value of the support group went beyond the original concept of helping those seeking tenure, by supporting a variety of professional development activities including publishing and presenting at conferences.

Academic writing groups can respond directly to the crucial support needs of librarians who wish to write for publication. Professional writing, traditionally a solitary activity, can be greatly enhanced through peer support. Participants in the writing program gain knowledge of the writing process by reading the work of others, providing feedback, and engaging in discussion. The group can also draw on the experiences of members and provide guidance on marketing work to editors, identifying publishing outlets, and meeting future writing partners. This is borne out by Professor Sarah Moore, Dean of Teaching and Learning, at the University of Limerick, Ireland:

People writing as part of a community of writers are more likely to learn faster about the conventions and challenges of writing, to support each other at times of blockage and to demystify the process of writing by sharing each others' successes and failures (2003, p.334).

Feedback from participants in the ANLTC program indicates they found it useful.

The Academic Writing Program is peer review with a safety net.

The program encouraged me to reflect on writing as process, i.e. the transfer of ideas from the inchoate to the concrete.

The peer-feedback was a wonderful opportunity to get positive constructive criticism.

The phased deadlines were great as they were achievable. I have no doubt I would never have got this far without the peer-feedback day deadline.

I had been trying to write an article based on my Master's thesis, but felt the work lacked focus. The Academic Writing Program's Roundtable discussion suggested that as it was a case study I should simply describe what I did, how I did it, and what I found. On that basis the following week I submitted an abstract for a conference paper [and] had it accepted. The paper has now been delivered at conference, and it is now in press in a peer reviewed journal

The Academic Writing Program has provided a supportive and encouraging environment. I have found the pairing system really valuable, as it encourages reading at various stages, and with different requirements, e.g. content, clarity, style. This reading and feedback is always done with mutual respect and trust.

Establishing a Writing Support Program

Various methods of providing formal writing support exist. From my experience, the support of library senior management is crucial. Being able to present a program under a formal national training body, in this case ANLTC, was very helpful. Regardless of the method used, the group needs to have a clear structure, a facilitator, and a system for establishing deadlines and goals for participants.

The model I describe can be presented as a single-day event (or condensed into a half-day with less time for writing) or can be extended to include the peer-feedback day. The writing exercises and activities used in the program are described in an article I published in *SCONUL Focus*, a library journal published in the United Kingdom (Fallon, 2009). People are welcome to use and adapt this model. Also useful as a writing support resource is the open blog. To date most of the postings are calls for articles, chap-

ters, books, and conference papers. In the future, I hope it will fulfill other functions, including finding international writing collaborators.

Other models exist. Murray (2008) describes four support strategies and gives outlines for content and structure for each. The strategies include a formal one-day writing course, a writers' group (which meets on campus for 90 minutes twice a month for six months), an off-campus facilitated writing retreat (for a minimum of two days), and a writing consultation exercise, where people work in pairs, taking turns to act as "writer" and "consultant". In this model the pairs meet once a month for regular structured discussion on writing projects. Murray provides a template for the consultation. Rankin (2001) offers useful advice on organizing an academic writing group including structure, membership, meeting guidelines (including giving feedback on writing), and maximizing the social and collegial aspects of the group.

Conclusion

The program is now in its fourth year. A survey of the initial 14 participants, one year after they attended the one-day workshop revealed:

- Three had either published or had articles accepted for publication by peer-reviewed journals.
- Three had either published or had articles accepted for publication in professional journals.
- One had published a book review.

Ongoing informal reports indicate that others have gone on to publish in both peer-reviewed and professional journals and have developed more confidence and motivation to write. There is a need for more research into support for librarians as academic writers. Initial evidence indicates that the writing support program has had a positive impact in developing academic writing skills among librarians.

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